



**TOWARDS A CLOSER
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FOREIGN
POLICY AND NATIONAL PRIORITIES**

Concept Note

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Foreword

In its first report on the need for a national strategy, Joussour Center has shown that in order to address major challenges and **serve national priorities, rigorous benchmarking of foreign policy** is needed. Strategic policy decisions should respect the following principles:

- Be largely free from **ideological considerations**,
- Implement **basic national foreign policy principles**,
- Respond to the objectives of the revolution and **transition to democracy**¹.

To further explore this topic, the present concept note aims to invite you to think of a key issue in this critical time of the history of Tunisia and the transition to democracy, which is that of **the relationship between foreign policy and the national priorities agreed upon on the promotion of democracy, achievement of a balanced development and fighting terrorism**.

Being a first contribution by Joussour in foreign policy, this concept note will focus on the key arguments and their logical sequencing without detailed analysis of second-degree ideas.

Joussour will publish a series of other concept notes on other foreign policy issues, which are of much interest to Tunisia, especially on the situation in Libya and on international terrorism.

¹See the report on “An urgent need for a national integrated strategy to deal with daunting challenges” (July 2015)

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1) Introduction: the need for a closer relationship

At first glance, it seems that the challenges posed by the transition to democracy are too big to overcome by a country as small as Tunisia, which has limited resources. This is compounded by the fact that these challenges have meshed with a changing geopolitical space.

In fact, there are so many reasons for the need to a closer relationship between foreign policy and national priorities. This will enable Tunisia to meet those priorities and present foreign policy as a key helping factor in addressing the challenges of this critical time. These reasons include:

- **Regional and international changes** with direct opportunities and threats on Tunisia. These changes should be addressed in such a way as to best serve national priorities.
- Tunisia is now in a good position in the region thanks to **the good progress it made in the democratic process**, which culminated in the **Nobel Peace Prize**, granted to the Quartet National Dialogue. This accomplishment needs to be capitalized in the pursuit of national priorities.
- In the few years before and after the revolution, **the guiding principles of the Tunisian foreign policy have either served the ruling parties and their interests or have been mingled with ideological considerations**. Tunisia has, therefore, missed good opportunities. Still, this advantage can be regained by making foreign policy to serve national priorities.

2) During the Bourguibian era, foreign policy has been governed by good basic principles

Even since the independence of Tunisia, foreign policy has followed a number of basic principles, which include the following:

- **Compliance with international legitimacy** and respect of decisions and requirements made by the international community.
- **Non-interference in the domestic affairs** of other states and the establishment of relations based on mutual respect.
- The development of **good neighborhood** relationships with adjacent countries, especially with Algeria and Libya.
- Support of just causes, especially **the Palestinian cause**.

Natural factors such as the size and geography of the country and the number of population have often shaped Tunisia's foreign policy. This policy has contributed to the country's stability preventing conflicts and tensions that may put social peace and development efforts at stake.

3) Ben Ali has used foreign policy to serve the interest of his own regime rather than in the pursuit of national interests

The way the ruling party has governed the country made it that foreign policy has been used as a **propaganda tool for domestic policies** in order to conceal human rights violations and undemocratic practices. Thus, foreign policy has been used voluntarily and involuntarily to serve the ruling party more than the interest of the country. Despite the fact that there has been some accomplishments (such as campaigning for the economic success and gaining the trust of several international financial institutions, the conclusion of partnership agreement with the EU, etc.), foreign policy had become a pawn on the regime's chessboard. This resulted in:

- **The lack of credibility** due to the discrepancy between the good image of the country promoted by foreign policy and the documented reports by some international organizations, which raised concerns about the poor situation of public freedoms and the rampant corruption at many levels in the government.
- **The lack of initiative** and full reliance on strategic decisions taken by powerful partner states and unions.

4) Foreign policy has become dependent on the domestic political equation after the revolution and deviated from its traditional line

a) The significant political change in the country has offered Tunisia a privileged situation in its geopolitical space

There has been a **significant change in domestic policies** for three main reasons. (1) People are having a say in the decision-making process. (2) Fundamental freedoms are promoted. (3) Tunisia has adopted a civil and democratic constitution.

This political change has offered Tunisia a **privileged place in its geopolitical space** because it was able to make the transition to democracy a unique example in the region, while other countries have plunged in chaos and civil wars.

b) The foreign policy has become dependent on the domestic policy equation

The new domestic policy equation has impacted decisions taken in the foreign policy area in terms of alliances, ideological approaches and political stances. **The tension between political parties and fueled polarization have caused several political problems** such as problems generated due to the way how the situations in Libya, Egypt and Syria have been addressed. This led to the following outcomes:

- Foreign policy has been used in the conflict between political parties rather than in the pursuit of national interests.
- **Misinterpretation of the awfully big and quick transformations** in Tunisia's geopolitical space. The generated opportunities and threats and the way how these transformations overlap with domestic challenges are either not expected and/or miscalculated.

c) Domestic political conflict is the reason behind the use of foreign policy in party conflicts which came at the expense of the national interests

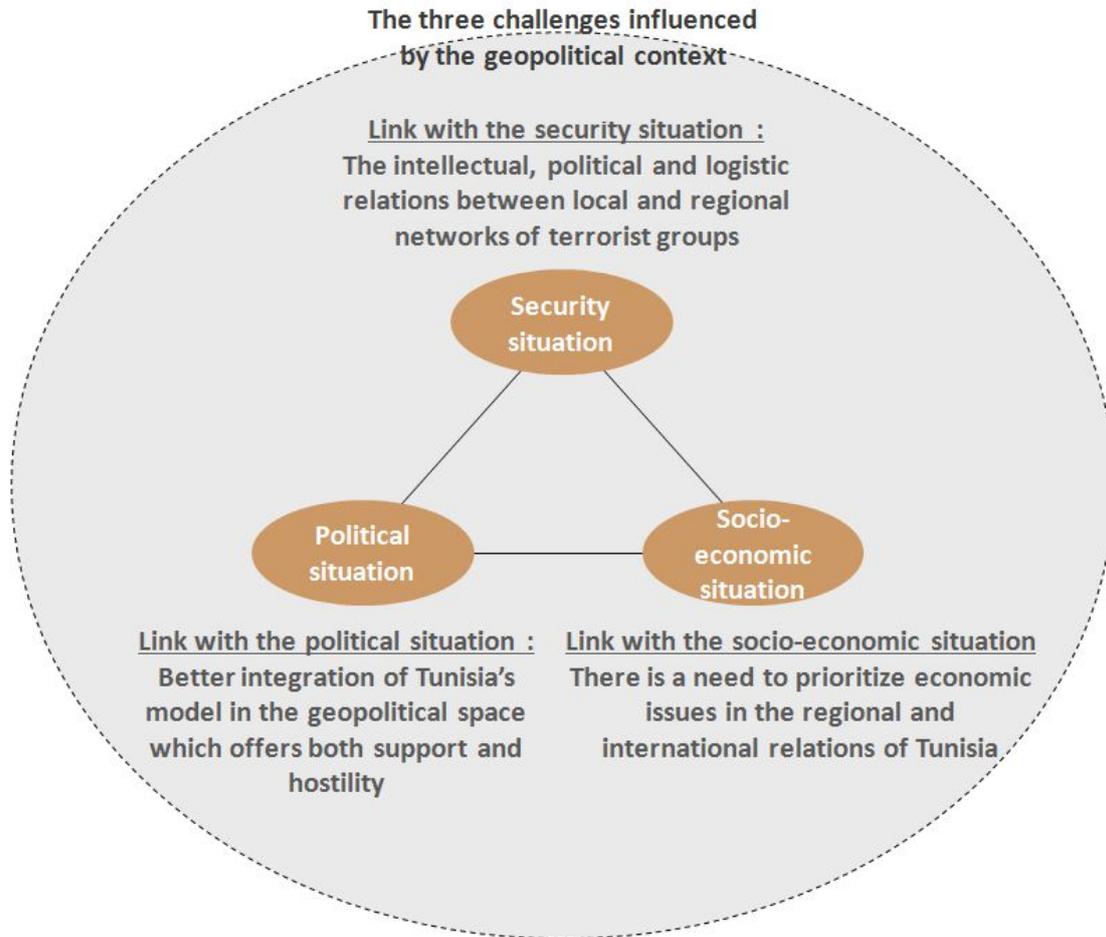
The tension areas in the region have been used by political parties **to attract more members through overwhelmingly ideological campaigns**. These tensions have been highlighted to fuel internal polarization, preventing, thus, **consensus-based approaches that can serve national priorities better**.

The Syrian and Libyan dossiers are two cases in point here. They are high-risk issues in terms of complexities as well as consequences on Tunisia's security situation.

d) Tunisia has missed great opportunities made available by the geopolitical transformations due to the domination of the internal calculation approach

The overlap between challenges and the quick and deep geopolitical transformation has become a determining factor in addressing these challenges, which include basically the way how to strengthen the democratic system, fight terrorism, and deal with the economic challenge that require necessary structural reforms.

Due to the domination of the internal approach and **the lack of awareness about the complexity of geological transformations** in our space and how they complicate further the challenges we are facing, Tunisia has missed good opportunities made available by these transformations especially on how to mitigate their risks and the related consequences.



Source: Report on "An urgent need for a national integrated strategy to deal with daunting challenges" (July 2015)

e) The deviation from traditional foreign policy principles generated negative consequences

A serious deviation from the traditional foreign policy principles towards a biased position in favor of a particular regional alliance, namely that of Turkey and Qatar, and an improper and unwarranted interference in the domestic affairs of other countries such as Egypt and Syria.

This led to the following results:

- Tunisia's relations with several countries in the region such as Egypt, Syria, KSA and UAE have grown tense and strained.
- Negative consequences due to the poor management of the crisis caused by terrorist threats and the return of the Tunisian fighters in foreign countries.

f) In conclusion

The outcomes of the post-revolution foreign policy can be summarized in the following points:

- The significant change in the country has not been invested in internally to develop a dynamic and realistic foreign policy serving national priorities.
- A tremendous confusion in foreign policy which led to missed opportunities and interests.

5) There is a need for a closer relationship between foreign policy and national priorities to promote national consensus and strengthen Tunisia's soft power

Based on the above arguments, Tunisia is now in **need for a closer relationship between foreign policy and national priorities**, which is required by the significant change towards a democratic system and the main challenges facing the country. Such relationship needs to:

- **Promote a large-scale consensus on big issues in foreign policy** to make it more credible.
- **To ensure the soundness and stability of basic foreign policy principles** as a reassuring factor to international and political partners.
- **Promote creativity in drafting a foreign policy** that can serve national priorities and be sensitive to the opportunities and risks generated by the geopolitical space.

a) The determining factor: National priorities should be set as a determining factor in making foreign policy decisions

Foreign policy and its related decisions, alliances and stances should be addressed on the basis the agreed upon national **priorities to promote harmony between local and foreign policies**, to render it immune from ideological pressures, prevent deviation in case a new party takes office and ensure that it is subject to an assessment for objective evidence.

b) The requirement: the traditional foreign principles should be restored and enriched with new democratic practices

We need to restore the traditional foreign policy principles, which deemed appropriate because they take the dominant factors of geography, history and culture into account. These principles should be enriched with the good practices of the new democratic system, which offered Tunisia the top places in its region, according to democracy standards. The new place will require Tunisia to fulfill further responsibilities conferred upon it by the requirements of the region.

c) The need for new guiding principles in foreign policy to forge that new relationship

Foreign policy needs to be determined by a range of guiding principles to (1) ensure stability and (2) avoid reluctance, improvised decisions, and being subject to party and individual ideological pressures. These principles can be summarized as follows:

Confirmation of the Tunisian peaceful model in its geopolitical space

The peaceful political model of Tunisia can help deal with the many challenges Tunisia is facing and promote civil rest by (1) breaking away **with the disputes with other states that are triggered by interfering in their domestic affairs**, and (2) **avoiding any attempt to export this new model** to neighboring states.

Non alignment with regional powers

In a tense and changing political landscape, it is not of the interest of Tunisia to align itself with the conflicting regional powers. It is rather of its interest to adhere to the principle of **positive neutrality** and **non-alignment** by only defending just principles and causes

Towards a better adaptation in the geopolitical space

A foreign policy needs to be flexible enough to benefit from the opportunities made available by the geopolitical transformations and avoid their threats.

Regular proactive studies need to be conducted on these transformations and their impacts on national interests.

Emphasis should be placed on the immediate geopolitical space

Algeria and Libya remain the key components in the national economic and security policy. A clear strategy has to be drafted to improve Tunisia's relations with these two neighbors.

The building of the new Libyan state is a prerequisite for the improvement of brotherly relations with this state and the promotion of the common interests of both countries and peoples.

Algeria, on the other hand, **is cornerstone in the international relations network of Tunisia**. The neighborhood relation, common history and cohesions between the two peoples need to be highlighted. Tunisia has in common with Algeria many economic and security interests, which require a common approach to regional issues, especially with regard to the situation in Libya and terrorism. Still, the domestic political specificities of each country need to be fully respected.

The use of Tunisia's soft power to improve her image worldwide

Tunisia's soft power can be based on a number of key facts such as:

- Tunisia is the first Arab democracy
- Tunisia has adopted a civil constitution
- The Tunisian quartet for the national dialogue won the Nobel Peace Prize
- The consensus-based approach is successful
- Islam is reconciled with democracy
- Governmental coalitions formed out of divergent ideologies
- A better place for women in society
- An active civil society
- Open and integrated economy
- Religious tolerance
- National consensus on fighting terrorism by respecting the rule of law and the fundamental freedoms

Designing measurable foreign policy objectives and indicators

There is a need to design measurable objectives that are attainable in specific timelines. This will enable policy makers to objectively assess, review and adjust foreign policy decisions.

d) The need for a new foreign policy and action plans

The challenges facing the country and the geopolitical transformations require **creative foreign policy action plans** that can enable the country to serve national priorities successfully. Two action plans are suggested here:

- Attracting assistance and support in the western and southern parts of the country.
- Campaigning for the Tunisian approach in settling internal disputes, which is based on the consensus among stakeholders and the support of civil society.

Action plan	Title	Stakeholders	Description
Government's action plan	Campaigning for the Tunisian model	Presidency of the Republic Ministry of Foreign Affairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restoring the foreign policy principles and enriching them with the new democratic practices • Setting national priorities as determining factors in making foreign policy decisions • Adopting clear guiding principles for foreign policy • Economic diplomacy
Regional development plan	Campaigning for inland regions	Elected regional authorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attracting aids and assistance in favor of least developed regions (the western and southern parts) • Equipping inland regions with the necessary development tools, such as training programs, civil society development activities, twinning activities with other cities etc.
The soft power plan	Campaigning for the good image of Tunisia	Political parties, CSOs, media, national figures, celebrities in art and sport etc	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Campaigning for the components of Tunisia's soft power (consensus, the constitution and the role of civil society)

Action plan 1: Attracting aids in favor of the western and southern parts of Tunisia

An overall political consensus has been reached after the revolution on a national project, whose components are democratization, terrorism fighting, development promotion, and structural reforms. But, still this project is facing bottleneck problems.

- **The current action plans are unable to address regional disparities between the eastern and western parts in the near future**
- **The regional disparity**, which was the cause of the revolution, **has been widened** due to the delay in introducing structural reforms, which in turn, caused by the challenges faced by the political process after 2011 election. Such disparity poses **real threats to the political process and the newly-born national project.**

Therefore, a new action plan is suggested which involves a diplomatic tool. Diplomacy can be used to reduce regional disparities, while waiting for structural reforms and their expected long-term impact to create a more balanced development. **This action plan involves the attraction of aids and to invest them in the western and southern parts.**

Tunisian diplomacy has a large number of strengths that can be used to make this action plan successful. These strengths include:

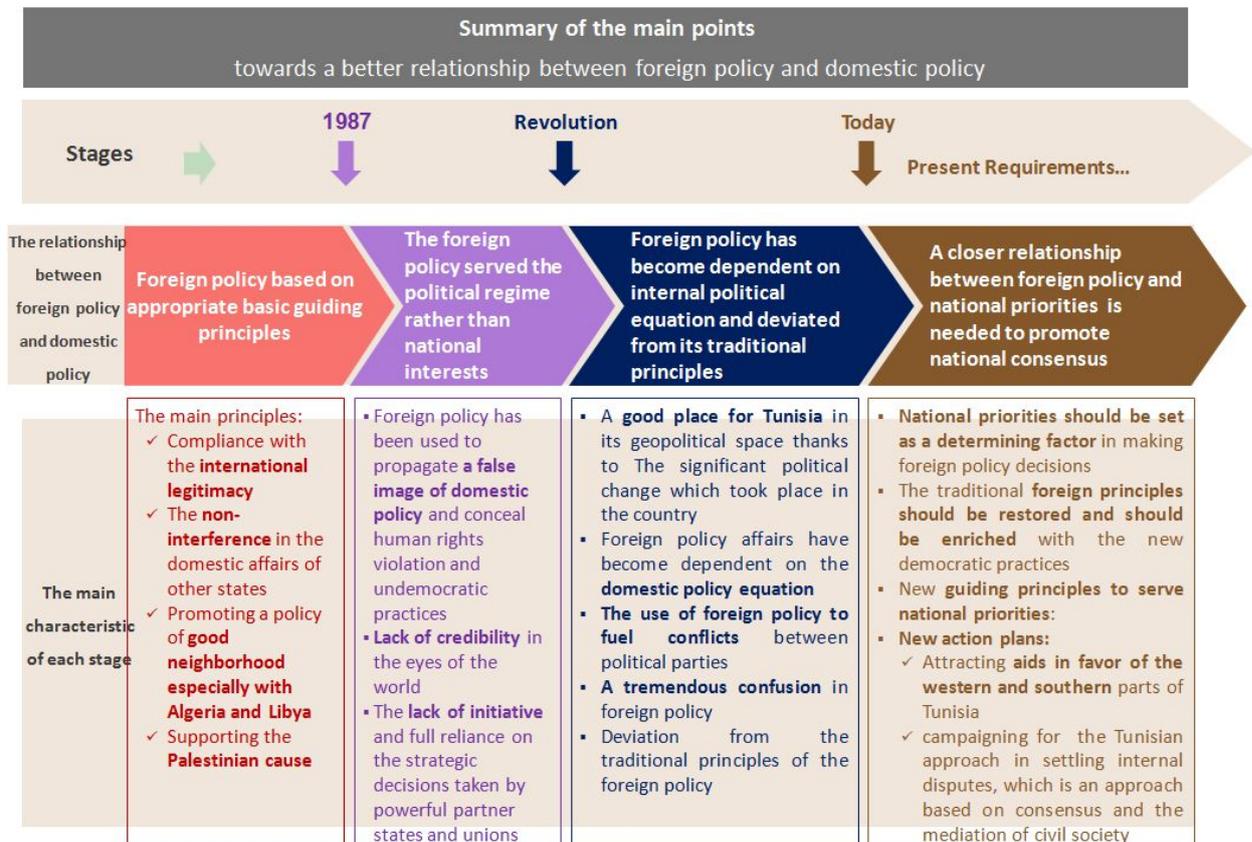
- The fact that **the Tunisian model is the best antidote to the ISIS model**, which is causing a real threat to southern and northern Mediterranean countries alike. The Tunisian model cannot, however, **be successful without a true democracy that can generate an economic growth in inland regions, which have been offering good breeding grounds for terrorist groups.**

- Reducing poverty and social deprivation can bring new hope to large numbers of young people from these marginalized regions, which **prevents illegal immigration to EU countries.**

Action plan 2: campaigning for the Tunisian approach in settling internal disputes on the basis consensus and the mediation of civil society

The Nobel Peace Prize granted to the National Dialogue Quartet is a world recognition that consensus is one of the strengths of the Tunisian approach in settling internal disputes. It is also an evidence of the success of the Tunisian democratization model. Unlike Tunisia, other MENA countries have plunged into destructive civil wars. Tunisian foreign policy has to use this prize, with all its symbolic value, to campaign for the successful transition to democracy, **as a key action in the use of soft power.** A better image of the country will enable it to overcome the remaining challenges. The prize has, in fact, been given to all national stakeholders, political parties and CSOs as they were all involved in the national dialogue and accepted its outcomes. Therefore, these stakeholders are called upon to back official authorities in campaigning for Tunisia’s consensus modal.

6) Summary of the main points



7) Conclusion

The scenes of the bloody terrorist attack in Sousse and the large number of Tunisian nationals affiliated with terrorist groups fighting in other countries will almost certainly spoil the image of the country and negatively impact its economic interests for so many years to come. But, Tunisia has extremely high potential that it can use to improve its image in the eyes of the world and help it serve its national priorities through:

- **The soft power** shown through the consensual democracy modal
- Both domestic and external efforts should be directed **to eliminate the breeding ground of terrorism** and their activities by reducing regional disparities and giving hope to young people in the most marginalized areas while waiting for economic reforms to be introduced.
- It is our destiny that Tunisian men and women would have to sacrifice their lives to protect the entire nation against blind terrorism, a price to be paid also by other countries in and beyond the region. But, unlike other countries, Tunisia has the honor to pay the price of its success as it is **targeted by terrorists because they attempt to destroy its newly born and successful democratic process and the system of more sustainable and equitable development.**